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Playing a populist card?

For the first time since the days of Nikita Khrushchev, a Soviet leader took the streets to engage in banter with Soviet citizens. As aired on the evening CBS-TV news last week, Mikhail Gorbachev was shown speaking animatedly to a throng of Leningrad citizens. Moscow TV devoted a whole half hour to playing the video tape of the event for Soviet viewers last Thursday night.

At one point during Mr. Gorbachev's apparently offhand encounter with Soviet citizens, one of them was heard to shout the question, "Why haven't you gotten closer to the people?" Looking momentarily nonplussed, Mr. Gorbachev grinned and responded: "How can I get any closer?" He then gestured with his arm to indicate that here he was, in person, close in with an assembled crowd of ordinary citizens. Yet it was obvious that he was closely guarded by at least a dozen security men who were seen dispersed in portions of the crowd. The throng itself of about 100 may have been hand-picked.

During his mingling in the throng, Mr. Gorbachev also spoke heatedly to the assemblage about the need for workers to toil harder if they want to have a higher living standard. "Discipline and hard work," he said, wagging his finger, are the keys to a better life "for you."

As if timed to Mr. Gorbachev's remarks about discipline, the next day, Friday, the Soviet government issued a decree raising the drinking age from 18 to 21. Moreover, the already strident press campaign against public and work-bench drunkenness was stepped up. Information accompanying the decree also indicated that "sweeteners" soon would be offered to encourage temperance. These will take the form of increased soft-drink production.

The government said that it hopes that by 1986 alcoholic consumption will yield to the consumption of soda drinks. Stiff fines already have been leveled for drinking of vodka and cognac, the two principal Soviet alcoholic beverages, during work hours. Additional stringent measures are expected as the Gorbachev regime attempts to "dry out" Soviet society, as the Russian emigre

newspaper *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* put it. Under the Brezhnev regime, about the only serious attempt made to discourage drinking was to put less vodka in a liter-sized bottle whose price was kept the same as before the volume was reduced.

Several veteran Sovietologists told the *New York City Tribune* that they could not recall such mingling in the crowds, as that of Mr. Gorbachev in Leningrad last Thursday, by a previous Soviet leader during the past two decades, or going back to Nikita Khrushchev. One of them, who called such posturing "demagoguery," noted that Mr. Gorbachev might be playing a "populist card outside the Kremlin walls in order to strengthen his power inside them."

On several occasions in the 1960s, Khrushchev would mingle with people in Soviet streets or in collective-farm fields. On one of these apparently "spontaneous" goings-to-the-people, the party first secretary sampled some ice cream as he bantered with citizens. On another occasion, Khrushchev turned up at the American pavilion of the Moscow trade fair. The famous "kitchen debate" between him and Richard Nixon broke out at that time amid a group of onlookers.

Lenin and Stalin were rarely pictured in a crowd and whenever they were, the scene looked rigged. During one of Lenin's very rare visits to a Soviet institution, a factory in Moscow in August 1918, he was almost assassinated. This was the second attempt on his life since the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917.

On one occasion in the late 1960s, just as an event honoring Soviet spacemen was to start and a string of official limos slowed to pass through the Borovitsky Gate into the Kremlin, a certain "Lieutenant Ilyin," apparently sitting in a small grandstand near the Kremlin Wall, pulled out a service pistol and managed to squeeze off several shots at the passing cars. He was quickly wrestled to the ground by security police. At least one bullet, however, had grazed the occupants of one of the limos containing Soviet cosmonauts. The would-be assassin had obviously aimed at the wrong

automobile, thinking that it contained Leonid Brezhnev. The Soviet leader, meanwhile, had been hidden behind curtained windows in a preceding auto that had already passed through the gate.

Crowd-pleasing gestures by Communist officials create a number of political problems, too, to judge by past "populist" actions by leading officials in the Soviet bloc. If Mr. Gorbachev intends to make going-to-the-people an earmark of his administration, precedent suggests that he will have to exercise caution. A leader engaging in such "democratic" as Communists call it, behavior arouses the suspicions of his peers in the oligarchy. They suspect a leader's attempt to "upstage" them by going over their heads to the popular masses.

In the modern period, Communist Poland and Czechoslovakia have been the scenes of such attempts at populism by reigning party leaders. In the former, Edward Gierek stunningly departed from the remoteness of his forerunner, Wladyslaw Gomulka, by indulging in 1970-80 in frequent mingling with workers and farmers, which was then shown on Polish state television.

In Czechoslovakia in 1968, Alexander Dubcek not only openly mixed with the people but developed quasi-democratic policies known as "communism with a human face." Both leaders, in Warsaw and Prague, suffered dismissal and humiliation as the result of their populism. Above all, they had generated an atmosphere of rising expectations in the populace. Such feelings in history have often preceded popular revolutionary outbursts, especially under despotic, centralized regimes. Such outbursts actually occurred in Poland at the end of Gierek's tenuous reign.

Most analysts doubt that Mr. Gorbachev plans anything as democratic-looking as the actions and policies of a Gierek or Dubcek. Yet parts of his recent speeches and his behavior in public contain notes of crowd-pleasing and demagoguery that could eventually get him into trouble with his jealous peers in the Kremlin.

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This, in fact, is the gist of a prediction concerning Mr. Gorbachev's current political standing that is made in the latest issue of the respected Washington intelligence periodical, *Early Warning*. Already unpopular with both the Soviet military and the security police, the publication says, Mr. Gorbachev is indicating in popular speeches and has on his suspected "agenda," an *Early Warning* informant told the publication, the intention to "cut back on present budgets for production of warships, missiles, and fighter planes... [He has developed] a program of 'intensive care' for economy's basic ills... [He has] a modernization program for Russian farming... However circumscribed, Gorbachev's plans indicate that traditionalists in the military-industrial complex were right to fear his ascent in the Kremlin."

According to *Early Warning*, Mr. Gorbachev put off convening the next party congress until February 1986, in fact, precisely in order to gain time to build a popular "support base" for his planned new policies. Meanwhile, the publication predicts, the military and the KGB will seek ways to "derail a leader they dislike." Much of the ruling clique, it is suggested, resent Mr. Gorbachev's efforts to bolster his power and prestige over their heads by making populist gestures to common citizens.

To date, Mr. Gorbachev has made two sorties into the midst of the public. The first was a sequestered visit to a Moscow factory earlier this spring. The other was last week's much-publicized street scene in the Soviets' second largest city of Leningrad.

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